

ABC NEWS**ANALYSIS**

Coronavirus is the biggest event of 2020, but it is not the story of the year

By International Affairs Analyst [Stan Grant](#)

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Coronavirus is the biggest event of 2020, but it is not the story of the year. (AP: Kin Cheung)

How quickly we forget that 2020 began with the threat of war.

When Iranian military mastermind Qassem Soleimani was killed in a targeted US drone strike in Iraq on January 3, the world truly did hold its breath.

Within hours the Iranians were threatening to retaliate and American forces were put on high alert. Long-time observers warned of escalation that could trigger a conflict between the biggest powers on the planet.

Thankfully the moment passed, but it had revealed our fragility.

Within a month of Soleimani's assassination the world faced another threat. A mystery virus we had heard was circulating in China spread around the globe.



Sophie McNeill ✓
@Sophiemcneill



HUGE HUGE news out of the Middle East. The US has just assassinated arguably what is Iran's most important military leader.



Maya Gebeily ✓ @GebeilyM

By year's end coronavirus would infect nearly 80 million people worldwide and kill more than 1.7 million people.

Economies have been shattered. Unemployment has soared and previously secure businesses have shut their doors.

No one has been spared: all of us have lost our freedom, forced into lockdown and forbidden to see loved ones.

Replying to @GebeilyM and @AFP

#BREAKING: Iraqi state TV says top Iran commander Qasem Soleimani killed in Baghdad attack - via @AFP

5:16 PM · Jan 2, 2020



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Our world will not be the same

Coronavirus is the biggest event of 2020, but it is not the story of the year.

The world is on a tilt, unsure of itself and more dangerous than it has been in living memory. COVID-19 will pass but our world will not be the same.

It has been said that a pandemic is a social phenomenon with a medical aspect. That's what we are seeing.

The world was unravelling well before COVID-19, but the virus has revealed its depth and accelerated the change.



The world was unravelling well before COVID-19, but the virus has revealed its depth and accelerated the change. (ABC News: Emma Machan)

The philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy in his book [The Virus in the Age of Madness](#), said "health becomes an obsession; all social and political problems are reduced to infections that must be treated".

Coronavirus has lifted the lid on simmering tensions and fears: racial divisions; deep inequality; loss of faith in institutions; the retreat of democracy and rising authoritarianism.

Levy writes "principles that represented the best of our Western societies, have been attacked by the virus".

An existential crisis for the West

The West represents less than 20 per cent of the global community but it has dominated the world for three centuries.

Yet 2020 has been a moment of existential crisis for the West, a crisis that has loomed for decades.

The West believes its values of liberty, freedom and reason are universal. Its belief in its superiority and untrammelled progress has underpinned colonisation and empire.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall 30 years ago American political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history", revelling in liberal democracy's triumph over communism.



After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 many in the West celebrated the defeat of Communism.

Now the resurgence of Communist China as a global power has knocked the West off-balance.

It has lost faith in itself and is turning inward, mired in culture wars and riven with toxic identity tribalism.

For the first time since the rise of West, a rival power is emerging that rejects so-called "universal values".

Western leaders believed that China was on the wrong side of history; that the Communist Party would change or it would inevitably fall. Neither has happened. It is the West that appears unsure of its place or its ideas.

'Ideas die too'

As Levy says, the virus ends lives but "ideas die too, because they live on the same matter as humans do, and because it is very possible that the pandemic, as it recedes, will leave them on the shore like dead jellyfish, gone without a trace...".

Our world resembles the 1930's: then, too, the world stood on the precipice. It had been battered by the World War I, the Spanish Flu, revolution and the Great Depression. The rise of fascism tipped the globe into another devastating conflict.



As health authorities struggle to contain the coronavirus outbreak, Australia's Spanish flu pandemic is providing experts with valuable insights. (*National Museum Of Australia*)

Think about the past two decades: terrorism; war in Iraq and Afghanistan; a refugee crisis; a global financial collapse; a rise of political populism; return of a rejuvenated far right in Europe; waning American leadership and of course China.

Our fear of COVID-19 is inseparable from a fear of a world increasingly unbalanced. Prime Minister Scott Morrison was right when he said we are entering a world "poorer, more disordered and more dangerous".

Bonhoeffer is my guide for a year of upheaval

Who have I turned to as a guide to process this year of upheaval? I have gone back to the 1930s and that time of roiling change and war, to a man who stood up to the worst of tyranny and paid for it with his life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and philosopher who was imprisoned by the Nazis and later executed.

Bonhoeffer warned us that democracy was captive to special interests which would destroy democracy itself. Conflicting interests, he said, "can never be completely resolved and minorities will yield only because the majority has come into control of the police power of the state."

Minorities, he says, reach a point where they will seek to wrest control. Is that not what we have seen in America, a country increasingly at war with itself; bitterly divided?



Protesters took to the streets following the killing of George Floyd to demand an end to police brutality against black Americans which has left the country bitterly divided. (ABC News: Niall Lenihan)

Bonhoeffer wrote of the "brutal character of the behaviour of all human collectives".

People, he said "have not yet learned how to live together without compounding their vices and covering each other with mud and with blood".

There have been moments of kindness but the world is at a crossroads

This year we have seen moments of empathy and kindness, perhaps more prevalent in countries like Australia, rich enough, small enough, and remote enough to hold the worst of the world at bay.

But elsewhere we see a spiral of death and politics. In the United States, Donald Trump will soon be gone from the White House but the feelings of resentment among those who put him there will remain.

Trumpism will not die while increasing numbers of poor Americans feel abandoned and without hope.

Joe Biden talks about hope and unity but it is fair to say that people voted for him more out of relief than enthusiasm. It is yet to be seen if this man who had failed before to win the presidency can lead America out of its malaise.



Did voters support President-elect Joe Biden out of relief or enthusiasm? (AP: Paul Sancya)

2020 was a perfect storm: the virus that came out of China has delivered us to a point where the world as we have known it is at a crossroads.

As Levy says we are at "a sharp point of the true 'real'...a point that pierces us and against which we pierce ourselves".

The killing of an Iranian general threatened war; a virus took our lives; China is poised to write the future; and the West wonders what the future will be.

What will 2021 bring? We know one thing, after this year we should know now what we face. As Levy says "humanity can choose between denial and delirium, neurosis and psychosis".